

WHAT DOES A SUCCESSFUL UNIVERSITY LOOK LIKE? - THE STUDENTS' VIEW

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Describing how a successful university from the student's perspective Looks Like is not an easy job. There is not a common agreement among students on what a university should Look Like and what it should offer. Even the idea of a university is diverse - while you could claim that we have something that we could call the European idea of a university that has spread around the world, the discussion about the role of universities in society are still on-going.

From the very beginning of the idea of universities, there were different ideas about what forms a university and what are the main groups within. In the early beginning, in the 11th century, we had the University of Bologna, which was an association of students, who even had the power to hire and fire their professors. On the other hand, the case in Paris was that the university was seen as the association of teachers and students. You can imagine that the students would not mind to keeping the old Bologna university idea, but the Paris was the one that prevailed. For a long time a university was a place where the professors and academic staff were the decision-makers. From 1999 on, we have the Bologna process, which has highlighted the idea of the multiple stakeholders having a common interest for higher education and where student participation was emphasised.

Higher education landscape was changing through history, and the idea of a university had been changing as well. However, I would dare to claim that the changes were much faster in the last 30-50 years. The massification of higher education has led to an expansion of universities and a big rise in the number of students, as well as to increased diversity of universities, which is still continuing. The Humboldtian idea of a research university seems to be changing as well, as the Learning and teaching aspects are being more emphasised and the question of course is what the university of the future will Look like. With more students, and with more diverse students, coming from different backgrounds, part-time students, mature students etc., the expectations of what a university should be have also changed. While access to higher education is still an issue in most countries around the world, the notion that higher education and universities are only reserved for the elites is changing. Beside the changes in higher education, the technological development in the last 20 years was very fast. The Internet revolution, together with new communication tools and social media, as well as MOOCs, blended-learning etc. has already had big effects on universities, and it is only starting.

So putting all these things together and trying to assess what students want and what they perceive a successful university is can be a very difficult question. But nevertheless, I think I have managed to identify four points that could be the most important, while still taking into account they are not the only pre-requisites for a successful university.

These are the four points:

- a successful university fulfils full range of purposes;
- a successful university offers quality education;
- a successful university puts students in the centre of the system and embraces student-centred learning;
- a successful university engages students and includes them in the university governance and decision-making processes.

Full Range of Purposes

Firstly, a successful university needs to make sure it fulfils full range of purposes, which include preparing students for life as active citizens in a democratic society; preparing students for their future careers and enabling their personal development; creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation (London Communique, 2007).

With the financial crisis, with the increasing discussion about the skills of graduates and the word that seems to be impossible to avoid lately, employability, the focus of the discussion about the role of universities has shifted towards the commodified and instrumentalised view on universities - to understanding universities as a tool for economic growth and as a tool to increase the competitiveness of the country. We have gotten to a point where for some countries, education is seen as an export. There are different examples of this in the world, starting from USA and Australia, though a more European example would be the discourse of some of the universities in the United Kingdom, whose representatives are talking about exporting education, attracting foreign students (that have to pay full tuition fees, going so far as more than 15.000 pounds per year), marketing education etc. The rankings and league tables have also not helped, and competition rather than cooperation is the new directive for many of the universities and higher education systems.

That has led to different responses from governments and universities. Governments, which are in most countries still the predominant funder of the higher education, are demanding more efficiency, better performance and more applicable research. This can lead to more "employable" courses, and to a level where higher education is almost a training and not education anymore. The discussions in higher education policy nowadays focus a lot on the idea of employability, which is usually understood in a very narrow sense and measured as employment rates, which is a problematic indicator for several reasons, starting with the fact that these rates don't reflect the success of the university, but rather the socio-economic situation of a country. Greece for example has almost 60% youth unemployment, but that is not a problem that was caused by higher education - it is a problem of the Greek economy and these rates in no way reflect the quality or success of the education.

There are also other arguments that call for a broader approach to education - one of them for example that we have no idea what will happen on the labour market. The top 10 in demand jobs in 2010 didn't exist in 2004, and universities should be preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, using technologies that haven't been invented in order to solve the problems that we don't know are problems yet.

That will not happen with the education systems that treat students as customers or that produces graduates as if university is a factory. Even in the discussions at various conferences about higher education, universities are often said to "produce graduates," while I would strongly argue that this formulation needs to be changed to say that universities educate, inspire, form graduates. This might sound like a linguistic matter, but it is an important one as understanding university as a conveyor belt is not what we would wish for.

One of ESU's core principles and beliefs is that education needs to serve multiple purposes, and critical thinking and active citizenship are among the most important. When we are talking about education as a product to be sold, and when we are discussing students as clients, we are negating these aspects and we are missing the point of education. Education is there to transform people's mind, it is there to inspire us, it is there to help us develop a critical approach to the world rather than conforming to the norms, it has a central role with social development and democratic empowerment. Education has the potential to dramatically improve life quality for both the participant and for all of society - social and financial status, improvement in general health conditions, acknowledgement of and attempts to tear down inequalities.

To add to this - In ESU, we strongly believe that being a student is more than just learning and collecting knowledge; it is about personal and collective development, creating a better society and a better future. And a successful university should reflect that.

Quality Education

There is a general agreement that a successful university should offer quality education. While that is clear, we come to the usual question of what is quality, and for this session more important, what is quality from the side of the students?

ESU has asked that question in a project, co-funded by the European Commission, called Quest for Quality for students. While there are of course still different opinions on the topic, and the answers range from the academic issues to employability/employment and student support services, we have managed to identify some concepts that could explain how quality is perceived by students.

For students, quality is essentially an experience or process of how their expectations are met in higher education. Students' core expectations relate to the teaching content and learning process while conditional expectations are concerned with the environment and conditions that are thought to be necessary to realise their core expectations, i.e. services, facilities and system structures for studying, as well as the academic environment and culture (Galan Palomares et al., 2013).

So, the relevant aspects that should be considered in order to understand how quality is perceived are the following:

- An adequate curricula (organised in learning outcomes);
- The learning and teaching process (student-centred learning);
- The learning environment (responding to student' needs) and
- The resources and facilities (including student support services).

Additionally, a good quality education in the view of the students is characterised by removing all obstacles to access, facilitating progress and completion; implementing student-centred approach to learning and fairly assessing students, braced by adequate student support service; ensuring links between learning, teaching and research activities; individual social and civic training for responsible and active citizens; mobility opportunities; academic freedom; and one where students are considered as full members of the academic community and competent constructive partners.

Student-centred Learning (SCL)

A successful university from the students' perspective puts the students in the centre and enables them control over their leaning. If I were to describe the student-centred learning in a couple of points: SCL is about the reliance on active rather than passive learning, an emphasis on deep learning and understanding, increased responsibility and accountability on the part of students, an increased sense of autonomy of the learner, an interdependence between teacher and learner, mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship (Attard, A. et al., 2011).

One of the main points of SCL is what is actually in the name - that students are in charge of their own learning process, which is adapted to different needs and interests of students, as well as to different learning styles. Students should, to a reasonable amount, have a choice to choose their courses and to learn different things. They should be involved already in the preparation of the course, in the design of course and curricula, as well as in the evaluation. To do this, teachers should be offered an additional support and should have opportunities for pedagogical training.

Student Participation

The last point might be the most important of all - a successful university includes students in the management of the institutions as equal partners to the academic and non-academic staff. Students need to be seen as an integral part of the academic community. There are however still very different views on what is the role and position of the students inside a university, and that also has to be addressed.

In a public debate, one often hears about students as clients, or even worse, customers. This assumption seems to be reasonable as the idea that clients who pay for a service have stronger rights to complain about a service paid for and not quite delivered.

I'll try to shortly point out why that is problematic. For one, it is difficult to accept that clients have stronger rights to express criticism than members of a community. The point of democracy is precisely the opposite: the weight of your vote and the strength of your voice are independent of the size of your purse.

Secondly, however, what seems like an innocent semantic shift betrays fundamentally different realities. Clients are interested only in the end product that they buy, and this may be consistent with the "outcomes orientation," "efficiency goals" or "performance based funding" mantras that are common nowadays in various policy documents. Clients have no interest in the internal workings of providers. If a provider delivers what clients want at a reasonable price, they will stay. If not, they will move elsewhere. If students are clients, why should they care about our higher education systems and institutions? (Bergan, 2011)

In order to avoid such a scenario, and if we want to reach the full potential of the university, students need to be included in the decision-making processes, they need to feel ownership of the university and their voices need to be both heard and respected. The word partnership is what I would say is the most important for any good and successful university.

Conclusion

There is a lot more that is necessary for a successful university: for example, ensuring proper financing would be a very basic condition. I also did not discuss about research or about institutional autonomy and academic freedom, which are also building blocks of a successful university. As the whole list would take much more than the space I was allocated for this article, I have focused on what I would perceive as the most important points of all - the ones that are crucial to ensure that a university truly is a community of teachers and students.

This can also be put in one final sentence: A successful university is one where, in the words of the famous Pink Floyd, students are not just another brick in the wall.

References

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